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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001646

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, EUR/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/28/2016

TAGS: [PGOV PHUM AM](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION POLITICIAN CLAIMS GOVERNMENT BANNED HIM
FROM TV AIRTIME

REF: YEREVAN 1075

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The leader of the opposition New Times Party, Aram Karapetian, has announced that the GOAM has banned television stations from providing him with airtime. A New Times spokesperson says no television station has aired a political interview with Karapetian since April 2005. Television stations denied they had been ordered not to air Karapetian, saying his claims were simply self-promotion. One television director said he frankly just disliked Karapetian personally. Media analysts and journalists, however, told us that television stations understood implicitly that they should not broadcast the opposition leader (reftel). The government continues to refute claims that opposition figures are denied access to broadcast media, referring to a flawed study touted by the presidential spokesman. While it is unclear whether stations have been explicitly banned from broadcasting certain opposition leaders, are practicing self-censorship, or simply choose not to air the opposition figures due to political leanings, it is clear that stations are not providing coalition and opposition figures with equal access to airtime. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In a letter sent to a number of embassies in Armenia, including the U.S. Embassy, Karapetian said that Armenian authorities, specifically Presidential Chief of Staff Armen Gevorgian, have instructed all Armenian television stations not to provide him with airtime. In the letter, Karapetian claims that no television station has aired a political interview with him since April 14, 2005. According to party spokesman Margarian, on October 19, 2005, Karapetian sent letters to 11 television station directors offering to pay for airtime, but none of the stations responded positively. (COMMENT: This seems an odd way of going about a media buy, as opposed to approaching stations one by one with a concrete proposal. END COMMENT.) Karapetian's office told us that since then, he had been scheduled to record interviews on several occasions, but each time something happened at the last minute that supposedly prevented the station from recording the interview.

¶3. (C) H2 TV Deputy Director Kristina Khachatrian, Yerkir Media TV News Director Gegham Manukian, and Armenia TV News Director Gagik Mkrtchian denied that they had been ordered not to broadcast Karapetian. Khachatrian said that Karapetian's claims were simply self-promotion. She said

that she had received Karapetian's letter asking for airtime, but that H2 did not provide paid airtime to politicians in advance of the official beginning of campaign season. (NOTE: In fact, a number of politicians have appeared on H2 television station during the past year; we have no information on whether they paid to get on the air. END NOTE.) Yerkir News Director Manukian told us he had also received the letter, but that he so disliked Karapetian that he would never put him on the air.

14. (C) Kentron TV political talk show host Petros Ghazarian told us that all television stations know that they are not allowed to broadcast interviews with Karapetian and two other opposition leaders--Republic Party leader Aram Z. Sargsian and Heritage Party leader Raffi Hovhannisian. (NOTE: We have not seen Hovhannisian or Karapetian give a political interview on television during the past year. We have seen Sargsian only a very small number of times. END NOTE.) Yerevan Press Club head Boris Navasardian also told us that, since all television stations are pro-government, the government trusts them to understand which political figures they should not air, and these politicians include Karapetian, Hovhannisian, and Sargsian.

15. (C) During a November 8 meeting with EUR/ACE coordinator Tom Adams, President Kocharian denied reports that opposition media figures are not receiving access to the broadcast media. He referred to a GOAM media monitoring project, which he said he had directed his staff to produce, after the Council of Europe refused--he claimed--his request to conduct an independent study. Kocharian said the study documented significant airtime for opposition politicians. Kocharian also postulated that some of the oppositionists who complain most stridently about lack of air time are simply judged as not noteworthy by journalists and editors.

16. (C) Presidential Spokesman Victor Soghomonian had

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presented us in August a set of DVDs showing television coverage of Armenian opposition figures. A few days following the Adams-Kocharian meeting, we received a new set of DVDs showing additional television coverage of opposition politicians. These DVD sets are apparently the product of the monitoring project Kocharian mentioned. The DVDs do not show any footage of Karapetian, nor do they include any opposition coverage by Public TV, the government-run station that is the only channel able to be viewed throughout the entire country.

COMMENT

17. (C) While it is unclear whether television stations have been explicitly banned from broadcasting Karapetian and other opposition leaders, whether they are practicing self-censorship to maintain favor with the government, or whether they choose not to air opposition figures due to pro-government leanings, it is clear that television stations are not providing coalition and opposition figures with equal access to airtime. As the 2007 parliamentary elections approach, opposition figures' continuing difficulties receiving airtime are at odds with the government's assurances that the vote will be free and fair. We will continue to encourage television stations to provide both coalition and opposition figures with access to broadcast time and will stress the importance of a free and unbiased press to the GOAM.

18. COMMENT CONTINUED: Unfortunately, Koacharian's argument that opposition figures simply are not newsworthy is not entirely baseless. Most of the "traditional" opposition parties and leaders--such as the ones referred to above--attract little public interest or appeal, having so long been ineffectual and self-defeating in their tactics.

That said, the current media climate is not conducive to the emergence of fresh opposition figures or the re-emergence of familiar ones. The public would be more ready to pay attention to potential opposition candidates if they had any sense that those candidates were in a position to have a meaningful impact on political life--a perception that at present is quite lacking.

GODFREY